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On 13 April 1919 thousands of innocent people were gunned down at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. The events that led to it and its importance in our struggle for freedom are vividly brought alive in this book by the well-known Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni.



# JALLIANWALA BAGH

Bhisham Sahni



*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

## **JALLIANWALA BAGH**

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### Acknowledgements

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—Bhisham Sahni

New Delhi  
17 January 1994



On the evening of 13 April 1919, after the firing, a woman by the name of Ratan Devi reached Jallianwala Bagh in search of her husband. The following is a detailed account of what she saw and experienced there:

I was at home, near Jallianwala Bagh, when I heard the sound of firing. I got up, greatly agitated, because my husband had gone to Jallianwala Bagh. In a state of utter panic I arrived there, weeping and lamenting, along with two other women. I saw piles of corpses and started looking for my husband. I found his body right after I had got past the first pile. To reach that point, I had to pass through corpses drenched in blood.

After some time, Lala Sunder Das's two sons arrived, and I asked them to bring a cot so that I could

take my husband's body home. The two boys left. I also sent my two companions away. It was then almost eight o'clock in the evening. People were not coming out of their houses for fear of the curfew. I stood there waiting, weeping.

About half past eight a Sardarji arrived. Some others had also come there and were searching among the corpses. I didn't know them. I implored the Sardarji to help me put my husband's body in a dry place, because where his corpse lay, there was a lot of blood. He put his hand under his head and I lifted his feet and we placed him on a wooden board.

Till ten o'clock at night I kept looking in the direction from which Lala Sunder Das's sons were to come, but nobody came. I got up and went towards the Ablowa Katra. I thought I would ask some of the students who were living in the Thakurdwara to help me. I had hardly gone a few steps when a man sitting on a window sill in a nearby house asked me where I was going so late at night. I told him I wanted somebody to help me to carry my husband's body home. He told me that it was past eight o'clock and, at that hour, no one would come to my assistance. I started off in the direction of the Katra. . . . Further on, I came upon an elderly gentleman sitting smoking a hookah. Nearby, two or three other men were lying asleep. I explained my trouble to him and with folded hands also asked the other men for help. . . . But they too replied that it was past ten o'clock, and that they were not willing to risk being shot.

I went back and sat beside my husband's body. Suddenly, my hand fell on a bamboo stick, which I then used to drive away the dogs all night. I saw three men writhing in agony. Close by, a buffalo was writhing with pain. Then there was a 12-year-old boy who was also in great pain. He begged me over and over again not to go away and leave him alone. I told him I was not going to leave my husband's body and go away anywhere. I asked him if he was cold and wanted something to cover himself with—I could cover him with my Dupatta. He asked for water. But there was no water to be had anywhere in that place.

As each hour passed, one could hear the metallic sound of the big clock-tower. At two o'clock in the morning, an injured man, one of whose legs was caught beneath a pile of dead bodies, begged me to free his leg. He was a Jat from a village called Sultan. I got up and, taking hold of his bloodstained clothes, pulled his leg out. After that, right up till five-thirty in the morning, nobody





came there. About six o'clock, Lala Sunder Das and his sons and some people from our street came with a cot and I brought my husband's body home. In the Bagh, I saw other people looking for friends and relatives.

I had spent the whole night there. I cannot describe my mental state. There were heaps of corpses all around me...several of which were of innocent children.... The whole night in that wilderness, the only sounds to be heard were the barking of dogs and the braying of asses.... What more can I say? God alone knows how I got through that night.

Jallianwala Bagh—the very name haunts the mind of any Indian. But very few people nowadays know the whole story of this incident. How the massacre happened and what its importance was to our freedom struggle—that is the story told in the following pages.

## REBELLION BORN OF DISCONTENT



What happened on that Baisakhi day was not an isolated incident. The distrust of Indians towards the British Government had been growing for long: the people of India wanted to be free of foreign rule.

During the First World War (1914-18), this discontent had gained in intensity. The main reason for this was that during the War the British Government, on the strength of its dominion over India, extracted all kinds of help from the country. Government officials, accompanied by policemen, went round the villages and forcibly recruited young men into the British army. Not only were soldiers recruited, but ten crore pounds were also raised from India as a 'war fund'. Further, the effect of the War on exports and imports caused a sharp rise in prices.

But that wasn't all. Right through the War, which lasted four years, several epidemics broke out in India—cholera, malaria, plague, influenza, etc. The influenza epidemic was so severe that, within two years, it claimed about one and a half crore lives. But no satisfactory arrangements for nursing or medical care of the sick were made by the British Government.

Unfortunately, in 1918, the rains too failed; as a result there were famines in several places. On the one hand, lesser foodgrains were being grown and, on the other, the prices were rising. In such a situation, there was bound to be growing unrest in the country. Throughout the land there were demonstrations, and people began demanding their rights.

In 1918, the War came to an end. Britain emerged victorious. But when the fighting was over, the British Government, instead of being sympathetic towards Indians, turned oppressive. During the War the Government had declared that it would make improvements in the

administration of India after the War, and that it would extend various benefits to Indians. But instead of instituting reforms, it adopted a policy of repression.

At that time, the growing discontent took the shape of three movements, preparations for two of which were made outside the country and the third within.

### **The Ghadar Movement**

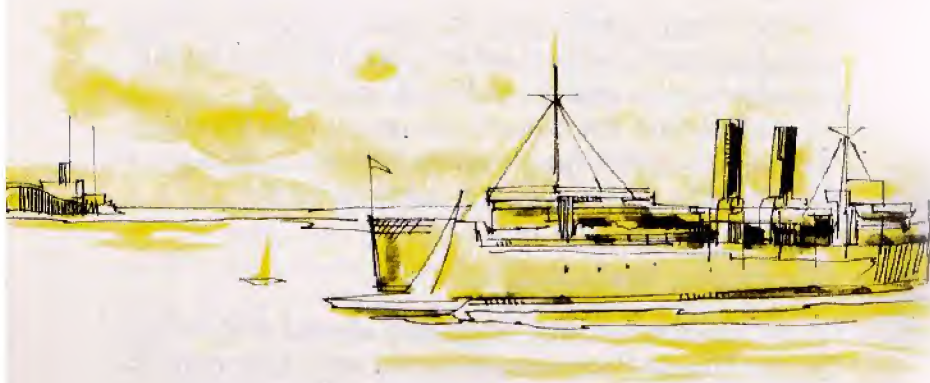
Of the movements that originated abroad that of the Ghadar (Revolt) Party was among the most important. In those days, many Indians had gone in search of work to America, Canada and other countries and settled there. They were not treated as equals, which made them feel humiliated.

In 1913, a league was formed in Canada. This league soon began to bring out a paper called *Ghadar*, in the very first issue of which the following statement appeared: "To-day there begins in foreign lands... a war against the British Raj... What is our name? Revolt! What is our work? Revolt! Where will this revolt break out? In India." Every page of the paper gave a call to armed revolt.

In the meantime, on 29 September 1914, the incident of the ship *Kamagatamaru* took place. Indians who had been unsuccessful in gaining entry into Canada as immigrants were fired upon. As a result 18 people







were killed and 25 wounded. About 200 immigrants were taken away and put in jail where, for years, they suffered the agonies of confinement. A wave of grief and anger swept over Indians at home and abroad as soon as news of the firing reached them.

By February 1915, about 8,000 people had secretly entered India and set up camps for the purpose of starting an armed insurrection. But the revolt came to nothing. Many of the agitators were caught and imprisoned. The revolutionary activities of the Ghadar Party thus came to an end.

### **The Khilafat Movement**

One of the other movements against the British outside India was the Khilafat movement, which began in Turkey. This movement attracted Indian Muslims and, since

it was an anti-British movement, in a way it became associated with the struggle for independence within India.

It was during the First World War that Turkey announced a *Jihad* (a holy war) against Britain. In those days the Sultan of Turkey was considered the leader—the Caliph—of all Muslims. Since he also headed a large empire, the Khilafat movement rapidly spread world-wide. In India, a large number of Muslim leaders threw themselves into this anti-British movement with great fervour. Gandhiji too welcomed this movement. Plans began to be made to gain freedom with the help of Germany and Turkey. An 'Army of God' was organized. But this plan too was unsuccessful. Some secret documents fell into the hands of the Punjab Government in August 1916; the Government became cautious and the movement could make no further headway.

### **The Situation Within India**

What was happening at that time within India? The Home Rule movement was gaining in strength. It was led at the time by two remarkable people—Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mrs Annie Besant, an Irishwoman. The course adopted by these leaders was more in keeping with the temperament of the Indian people and the situation in India at that time. For one, the leadership spoke out





Bal Gangadhar Tilak



Annie Besant

frankly, they did nothing in secret. For another, their movement, being unarmed, was of a non-violent nature.

The Home Rule movement spread rapidly and the British Government began making plans to suppress it. Lokmanya Tilak, who had already spent a long time in jail, launched his Home Rule movement in April 1916. During the summer of 1917, while the War was still in progress, Mrs Annie Besant was arrested, and in Madras the Home Rule League's printing press was confiscated. A wave of anger swept across the entire country over Mrs Annie Besant's arrest.

Around that time America had entered the War on Britain's side. President Wilson of America advised the British Government that in order to deal with the growing unrest in India, it ought to carry out reforms in its policy. Following this suggestion, the British Government announced on 20 August 1917 that reforms would be made in the administration of India. This announcement slowed down the Home Rule movement. Indians began to feel more hopeful that after the war their situation would improve. But the British had other intentions. In December 1917, the British Government set up a body, the Rowlatt Committee, to deal with sedition.

In July 1918, the report of this Committee was published. In it, India's freedom movement was referred to as an agitation of hooligans, involved in looting and killing. It tried to show that Indian patriots were insurgents who believed in looting, arson and violence, that they were a great menace to society, and that it was feared they would create disturbances in the country.

It was stated in this report that since difficulties were being encountered in suppressing such miscreants, it would be necessary to make new laws. Under these laws the wartime restrictions on the rights of the citizens were to continue. Based on the recommendations of the report two laws were proposed. Under the first, strict control over the press could be exercised. Under the



second, Indians could be kept in jail for up to two years without being produced in court. There was condemnation of this proposal throughout the country. There were comments in the newspapers and protest meetings everywhere. But the British Government was unmoved.



### GANDHIJI COMES ON THE SCENE



At this point, Gandhiji entered the arena of Indian politics. If Gandhiji had not joined the country's struggle for freedom then and taken over its reins, the form and direction taken by our struggle would have been different. The Home Rule movement had been joined

mainly by intellectuals and the educated middle class, but it was yet to become a movement of the masses. Sporadic action was also being taken by young, armed revolutionaries.

Gandhiji wanted everything to be done in an open manner—there should be nothing hidden or underhand. Secondly, the struggle should not remain confined only to passing resolutions and sending letters of protest to the Viceroy and senior British officials, but should be a

people's struggle involving the entire country. It would include strikes, public meetings, processions, etc., which would be planned and would continue on a long-term basis.

This took the form of the non-cooperation movement, a movement which ordinary people started joining in large numbers. Gandhiji was convinced that the movement would not be successful until the Indian masses joined it willingly. Gandhiji's vision of the struggle was new and different. He did not believe in the use of weapons. He believed in using only non-violent methods in fighting the British. Violence was not to be used in his struggle. Faced with whatever odds, Indians were not to retaliate with violence—their sacrifices would convince the oppressor that his behaviour was unfair. He believed in changing the heart of the antagonist. His belief was in inner strength. He did not want to obey British laws and opposed them vehemently, but not by resorting to violence.

It was no mean achievement on his part to have convinced the people that even if shot at, they should not shoot back, and that at the same time, there should be no waning of their determination to keep up the non-violent movement. This is what Gandhiji called passive resistance—Satyagraha.

### **Rowlatt Bill**

On 20 February 1919, Gandhiji wrote a letter to the

Viceroy's Private Secretary informing him of his possible course of action—Satyagraha—against the Rowlatt Bill. This was something unheard of.

There was no response from the Viceroy.

On 23 February Gandhiji announced that he would shortly launch his Satyagraha movement. The very next day, he and his companions took the pledge of Satyagraha and informed the Viceroy's Private Secretary by telegram of the lines on which he would organize his agitation.

There was no response from the British Government to this letter either.

On 1 March 1919, the Satyagraha movement was launched. That day Gandhiji made a statement which was published in the form of a letter in various newspapers and journals. This included the pledge of Satyagraha. The following is an extract from the pledge:

Being conscientiously of opinion that the Bills... are unjust, subversive of the principles of liberty and justice... we solemnly affirm that in the event of these bills becoming law and until they are withdrawn, we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws... We further affirm that in the struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person or property.



Immediately after this, Gandhiji went on a tour around the country. He visited many places including Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Uttar Pradesh. Making contact with the people on a massive scale, he laid special emphasis on non-violence as the cornerstone of his movement.

On 11 March 1919, he sent a telegram to the Viceroy's Private Secretary saying that there was still time, and that the Government should not be too hasty in making the Rowlatt proposals law; that if it respected the people's views and bowed to them, the people's esteem for the Government would increase rather than decrease.

The British Government paid no heed to his words and, on 18 March 1919, one of the Rowlatt proposals was made law, which came to be known as the Rowlatt Act.

Immediately, signs of passive resistance started spreading throughout the country. On 24 March 1919, Gandhiji made a declaration that whenever the people of a country began to feel that any particular law was tantamount to a slur against the country, it became their bounden duty to oppose it.... The people of India abhorred violence. In the present circumstances, without harbouring any ill-feeling or enmity in their hearts, they would demonstrate their opposition to it.

Gandhiji inaugurated the movement with a one-day



hunger strike. For a political struggle this was something unique, and it made a profound impact on the people of the country.

The British administrators said that the Satyagraha movement posed a great threat to the British empire. They said that the empire was also under threat from Afghanistan, Soviet Russia, Turkey and other countries, while within India there was danger from armed insurgents. For these reasons, it had become necessary for the British Government to adopt policies to contain rebellion—that was the official view. But actually these arguments were utterly false. The British had been



glorious in the War; what danger could threaten them now? Still, the British called the Satyagraha movement a "criminal conspiracy" and said that its basic aim was to subvert the law of the land, and that even peaceful strikes were against the law because they inflamed the feelings of the people.

But that was not the end of the matter. They also started trying to defame Gandhiji. They said that Gandhi was getting help from abroad, that the Afghans, the Russians, the Turks and the Germans were helping him, and that what remained of the Ghadar Party was also behind him. They went to the extent of suggesting that the Japanese and Russian revolutionaries had made Amritsar the centre of their activities, and the Germans were masterminding the Satyagraha.

These stories were being concocted so that when the British attacked a movement which was peaceful, it would appear as though the use of oppressive measures had been unavoidable.

### THE SITUATION IN PUNJAB



Against the backdrop of this nationwide Satyagraha, what was the situation in Punjab?

The movement was spreading throughout the country, but Punjab had become its hub. The people of Punjab were joining the movement with great enthusiasm. That

was where the largest number of demonstrations and meetings opposing the Rowlatt proposals were taking place.

This astonished the British Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer. O'Dwyer was a severe, hot-tempered man. He had not imagined that the people of Punjab would oppose British rule, because during the War the British Government had received the maximum help from Punjab. Now he started feeling that the Punjabis had





Michael O'Dwyer

betrayed him, since the stiffest opposition was from Punjab. It had reached the stage where Amritsar was now reputedly a hotbed of rebellion.

Amritsar has always been an important city in Punjab. At that time the population of the city was about one and a half lakhs and it was the most important religious place of the Sikhs. Moreover,

being a large trading centre, it was connected to the important towns and cities of the country.

The struggle for independence was bringing various new leaders to the fore. In those days, there were two leaders from Amritsar whose names were on every tongue. One was young Dr Kitchlew, who had returned from Germany after qualifying as a barrister, and the other was Dr Satyapal, who, although a doctor by profession, had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the freedom struggle. Both these leaders were members of the Congress.

In December 1918, these two leaders had attended a convention of the Congress, and had invited the



Dr Kitchlew



Dr Satyapal

Congress Working Committee to hold the next convention in Punjab. Their suggestion was accepted. This had added to the popularity and influence of both the leaders in the city.

These young leaders had already been working with great dedication in opposing the Rowlatt proposals and in some local matters. And now, Gandhiji's Satyagraha movement was being received with great fervour and enthusiasm throughout Punjab.

On 21 March 1919, a cartoon appeared in the Amritsar paper *Waqt* which depicted the unfairness with which Indians were being treated by the British Government even though the War was over. This cartoon showed Britain's Secretary of State for India in the act of



### **Jallianwala Bagh ... What Was it Like?**

This stretch of open ground is located in Amritsar in Punjab. At one time, a man called Pandit Jalla had a garden laid out there, which came to be commonly known as Jallianwala Bagh (Garden of Jalla).

In the year 1919, it was a desolate, uneven piece of land. Houses had come up all around it with their backs towards the ground. It came to be used for celebrations and gatherings. Four or five lanes from the town opened into it. One led in from the market, but this was very narrow. At that point the ground was at a slightly higher level.



presenting India its charter of freedom and Mr Rowlatt, just then, opening his bag and—instead of producing the charter—letting loose a black snake on Indians. When he saw this cartoon, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, was incensed.

It was at this time that the Rowlatt proposal became law. Gandhiji immediately fixed 30 March as the day for a nationwide strike, but later, realizing that more time was necessary to effectively prepare for the strike, he postponed it to 6 April. However, news of this change in date did not reach Amritsar and several other places in time.

### **29 March 1919**

At 4.30 p.m. on 29 March 1919, a meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh, which was attended by thousands of people. The purpose of this meeting was to make arrangements for the next day's strike—30 March. Later, the British Government was to make the accusation that at the meeting anti-Government sentiments were being whipped up. But, in reality, not one objectionable word had been uttered.

At the meeting, Dr Satyapal was the first to speak. He spoke clearly and effectively, requesting the people to maintain peace and to carry out the strike in a peaceful manner. He said that not a single word should be uttered against either the police or the Government, and that the strike was being called only to demonstrate the people's



anguish over the Government's oppressive policies. He also said that during the War, the people had given the Government the maximum help they were capable of, only to be rewarded with a tightening of the fetters of slavery.

After this, Dr Kitchlew spoke. He said that during the War, the British Government had been full of praise for India's loyalty, and had announced that reforms would be made. He pointed out that what they (the Indians) had in mind was Home Rule, and Home Rule of the same kind as other self-governing British dominions.

He said at the end:

We do not wish to harm either the police or the bureaucracy. It is Gandhiji's order that we don't raise a hand against police or Government officials, even if they resort to violence.

Girdhari Lal, who was presiding over the meeting, said that no one would be forced to take part in the strike on the following day. Those who wished to join the strike could do so, and those who did not could keep away.

### **30 March 1919**

30 March 1919 arrived. People from different classes and religions came together in the streets. Shopkeepers closed their shops of their own accord. All work came to a standstill. There was not so much as a tonga plying.

The strike was total. The next day the papers carried this news with banner headlines. That day in the evening a public meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh. This was presided over by Dr Kitchlew. The time fixed for the meeting was 4.30, but the meeting started even before 4 o'clock, because by then over 40,000 people had already assembled.

At this meeting, in addition to the speeches, two resolutions were passed. In one, the Rowlatt Act was condemned and its repeal demanded. In the other, it was decided that prompt notice of the meeting should be sent by wire to Mahatma Gandhi and the press.

There was a similar strike in Delhi. There, too, news of the change of date for the nationwide strike had not arrived in time. Some violent incidents took place there. On the day of the strike, several volunteers had gone to the railway station, where they urged the workers of the Railway refreshment stall to go on strike. But they did not agree, and this led to a scuffle. After a while, matters escalated and the Railway Police arrived. They fired at the crowd, killing eight and wounding double that number.

That evening, a public meeting was held in Delhi, presided over by Swami Shraddhanand. The police arrived there too. But on Swamiji's reassurance that there would be no disturbances, they withdrew. However, after Swami Shraddhanand's speech, when the people formed a procession under his leadership, the



armed police blocked their path. Swamiji then bared his chest and challenged the police to shoot him. At that point a Government official arrived on horseback and ordered the police to leave.

The next day, in the evening of 31 March, the corpses of the men who had been the targets of police firing were paraded on biers through the streets of Delhi. Naturally, the incidents which had taken place in Delhi inflamed the feelings of the people in Punjab.

#### **Scenes of Hindu-Muslim Fraternization**

The following excerpts are taken from the report sent by the Delhi correspondent of the *Bombay Chronicle* on 4 April 1919:

Some Mussalmans belonging to the commercial class issued a notice over their signatures last night announcing that all should attend the funeral service for the souls of the martyrs of the Delhi Tragedy, which would take place in the Juma Masjid after Friday prayers. The news spread that the Hindus also intended to attend the service.... This Friday prayer was said at the usual time attended by more than fifteen thousand Mussalmans, an unusual number on ordinary Fridays. Then followed what must ever remain a most unique incident in the history of Islam and India. Thousands of Hindus went to the Mosque to join the funeral service, who were freely and most courteously accommodated inside the Mosque by the side of the Mussalmans.

#### **2 April 1919**

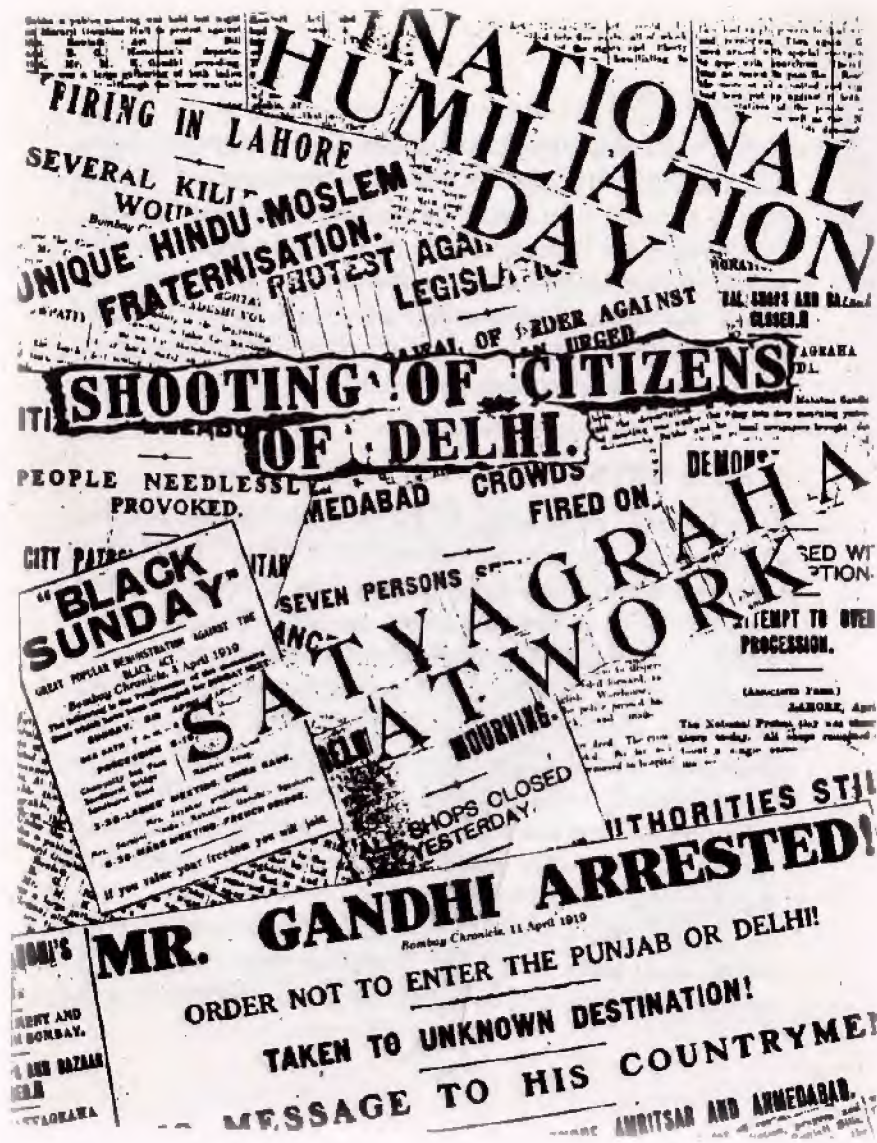
During those days, a follower of Gandhiji, Swami Satyadev, was travelling through Punjab and he spoke at various places about the importance of having faith in oneself. On 2 April at Jallianwala Bagh itself, Swami Satyadev addressed an audience of 7,000 people. Over and over again, he stressed that under no circumstances should they take to rioting, nor should offensive language be used against Government officials.

#### **5 April 1919**

On 6 April, there was to be another strike. Michael O'Dwyer on his part did his best to avert it. Dr Kitchlew was prohibited from making speeches at any gathering. Gandhiji was prohibited from entering Punjab. On 5 April, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar called a meeting of the citizens which was attended by many Rai Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs and other supporters of the Government. The Deputy Commissioner made an appeal to all those present to prevent the strike from taking place. He even succeeded in getting their concurrence and the news that there would be no strike on 6 April spread all over Amritsar.

When the young Congress workers received this news, they were infuriated. Together they decided they would go from house to house informing people that the





strike had not been cancelled, that it would definitely take place. That day there was a cricket match in Amritsar at which there were thousands of spectators. Just as it was getting dark, Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal arrived there and, mingling with the spectators, passed on the news that there would definitely be a strike in the town the following day.

### 6 April 1919

And that is exactly what happened. The next day the strike was total; even the small traders, street vendors and sellers of milk and curd joined in. And it was entirely peaceful.

That evening a public meeting was held in Jallianwala Bagh which was attended by 50,000 people. In addition to speeches and the recitation of poetry, three resolutions were passed. Under the first, the British Sovereign was requested to repeal the Rowlatt Act. Under the second, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab was asked to withdraw his prohibition against the making of speeches by Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal. Under the third, tremendous respect for the Satyagraha movement was expressed and there was a proposal to set up a Satyagraha Committee.

Finally, a barrister, Badr-ul Islam Ali Khan, said in his presidential address:

In accordance with Gandhiji's teaching, we shall endure all pain and sorrow with patience and fortitude. False-



hood will be obliterated and truth will prevail. If you remain calm, patient and tolerant, it will have a profound effect on everyone. But if there is the slightest trouble anywhere, if even two men clash, it will have bad consequences and the meeting will be ineffective. Those present are therefore requested to leave the meeting place in a peaceful manner, and not to take out any kind of procession or to hold a demonstration.

Gandhiji had announced that he would launch his movement of passive resistance on 7 April after the nationwide strike on 6 April. The strike on 6 April was successful and peaceful. But within three days of the launching of Satyagraha the situation deteriorated in Amritsar. This was chiefly thanks to the machinations of the British Lieutenant-Governor.

### 7 April 1919

On 7 April, Gandhiji brought out a paper called *Satyagrahi*. The Government had not been asked for permission to publish this paper and it had not been registered. This was a violation of the Indian Press Act. In his paper, Gandhiji recommended four books to the Satyagrahis and the general public. This was counted as civil disobedience for the simple reason that these books had been banned by the British Government. Their titles were: *Home Rule for India (Hind Swaraj)*, *Sarvodaya and Universal Awakening (Sarvodaya Athva Vishvavyapi Prabhat)*, *The Story of Satyagraha (Satyagraha ki Kahani)*, and *The Life and*

*Work of Mustafa Kamal Pasha*. The first three of these had been written by Gandhiji himself. The objective in selecting these books was to guide the Satyagrahis on how those who desired to serve the people could overcome the difficulties they encountered. This also fulfilled the need to provide the people with reading material in which, in accordance with the principles of Satyagraha, there would be neither acceptance nor encouragement of any kind of violence.

That day the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab participated in the proceedings of the Legislative Council at Lahore. At the end of the sitting, he warned the newspapers and political workers that whatever they were writing and saying would never be forgiven.

### 8 April 1919

On 8 April, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar wrote a detailed letter to the Commissioner at Lahore about the situation in Amritsar. He sent a copy of this letter to the Lieutenant-Governor, Michael O'Dwyer. A part of this letter is reproduced below:

I think we shall have to stand up for our authority sooner or later by prohibiting some strike or procession which endangers the public peace. But for this a really strong force will have to be brought in and *we shall have to be ready to try conclusions to the end to see who governs Amritsar*. For this I should want a movable column from Lahore available at 6 hours'



notice.... The Khan Bahadurs and Raisahibs are dead, and not fresh corpses at that. I am trying to get in touch with the new leaders who have influence. I was wrong in thinking I could influence Kitchlew—he is too deep in [the movement]....

### 9 April 1919

If a peaceful atmosphere had been created in Amritsar, an important reason for this was the unity of the Hindus and Muslims. The desire for a united country had bound people together and this spirit had been evident on 30 March and 6 April.

Ram Navami was on 9 April. The people of Amritsar

decided to observe this day as a 'national solidarity day'. In the afternoon, there was a procession in which a large number of Muslims also took part. Together with slogans glorifying Hindu gods and goddesses, people raised slogans like



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'Long live Mahatma Gandhi!', 'Long live Hindu-Muslim unity!'

There was on this occasion a remarkable display of Indian idealism. Amritsar's British Deputy Commissioner stood watching the procession from the verandah of the Allahabad Bank. What was quite remarkable was that whenever a group of musicians recognized him as they passed by, they would stop and play 'God Save the King', the British national anthem. From this it was quite clear that in their hearts the Indians did not harbour feelings of animosity towards the British, and when they played the anthem they did so with respect.

The procession passed off peacefully. Although the leaders had been prohibited from making speeches, there were no disturbances anywhere. Quite a number of Europeans were freely walking about in the streets of Amritsar without being harmed in any way.

The Lieutenant-Governor received the news that the Ram Navami celebrations had passed off peacefully. Even so, he ordered the arrest of Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal, and decided to send them to Dharamsala, a town in the hills of Himachal Pradesh. He hoped that by taking such a provocative step, the people of Amritsar would be so incensed that it would give him an opportunity to take action against them. He arranged to have various army contingents in Amritsar by 13 April—the day he was to take 'intimidatory' measures.

The police was posted at several places.

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## 10 April 1919

On this day Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal were called to the Deputy Commissioner's residence, and from there they were both sent away by car to Dharamsala.

Michael O'Dwyer also decided that Gandhiji would not be permitted to enter Delhi or Amritsar. According to another order conveyed to Gandhiji, he could not leave Bombay. In spite of these orders, Gandhiji set off for Punjab. When he was stopped on the way he refused to comply with the order. He said: "I want to go to the Punjab, in response to a pressing invitation, not to foment unrest, but to allay it. I am, therefore, sorry that it is not possible for me to comply with this order".

At Palwal station, Gandhiji was taken off the train. As he was being put on a train to Bombay, he made an appeal to the citizens of India: "Do not be angered by my arrest. And do not do anything tainted with untruth or violence".



Thinking that Gandhiji's arrest would cause unrest to spread among the people, which could result in violent incidents somewhere or the other, the Government prepared in advance to take action. At the Amritsar fort, orders were given "to have the guns in position, and show no hesitation to open fire if the mob made for the Fort, or attacked the railway station".

The moment news of Dr Kitchlew's and Dr Satyapal's arrest spread, there was a strike all over town. Congress workers insisted that shops be closed and people assemble in Aitcheson Park. It was their plan that all the people, after gathering in this park, should go to the Deputy Commissioner's house to ask for the release of the two leaders.

It was around 11.30 when the shops started to close, and people started collecting in the Hall Market. Crowds of people passing through the Hall Gate soon reached the Hall Bridge, at the other end of which a contingent of mounted police was already stationed.

So far, there had been no trouble anywhere, not even when the crowd passed by the Town Hall and ran into some Britishers. Nobody said anything to them. But the mounted police at the other end of the Hall Bridge stopped the crowd and refused to let it go any further. Several people in the crowd tried to move forward. However, others in the crowd tried to stop them. In the meantime, Deputy Commissioner Irving and Captain



Massey arrived on the spot. Another contingent also arrived. Then two soldiers dismounted from their horses, took up their positions on one side, and fired on the crowd. Some people collapsed on the spot while others were wounded. The crowd remained where it was.

About 1 o'clock, Deputy Superintendent of Police Plomer arrived. With him were 24 constables and seven mounted policemen. The police moved towards the crowd with fixed bayonets. The crowd began to move back. At that point a contingent of infantry arrived as well.

By this time, the crowd was highly incensed. For one, they had been unsuccessful in getting their leaders released, and for another, a number of their companions had been killed or wounded. The people were seething with anger, but even so, they quietly picked up their dead and wounded, and moved off towards the Hall Market. Then they got word that police posts were being set up at various points in the city. This enraged them even more and, in this mood, the crowd turned back towards the Carriage Bridge. Now people had staffs and sticks in their hands.

On one side of the bridge was the infuriated crowd. On the other side stood Deputy Commissioner Irving along with armed soldiers. Sensing how critical the moment was, two lawyers—Salaria and Maqbul Mahmood—appealed to both the crowd and the author-



ities to remain peaceful. But some people in the crowd threw sticks and stones at the soldiers. The soldiers immediately opened fire, killing 20 people and wounding many more. Before the firing, no warning had been given. The two lawyers barely escaped being hurt. Maqbul Mahmood rushed to the civil hospital to arrange for the wounded to be brought to the hospital on stretchers. But the British officer, Plomer, gave an order that no help was to be given by the hospital.

People were going mad with rage. Some of them attacked the telegraph office and went and dragged the telegraph officer out of his house. But an army contingent sent from the railway station to defend the telegraph office managed to save him.

At the same time, a group of people attacked the railway goods depot. The Station Superintendent barely escaped with his life, but a guard died at their hands.



Three other Britishers lost their lives at the National Bank. The Bank building was set on fire. The Bank's godown, which was full of bales of cloth, was looted. The manager of another bank, the Alliance Bank, was killed and the bank looted. The Chartered Bank was also attacked, but the manager and his assistant were saved by the Indian staff. In the same way an Englishwoman, Miss Sherwood, was attacked, but was rescued by an Indian. Several other buildings were set on fire, there was looting and some other lives were lost.

The question arises as to whether it was proper to fire on the crowd in this way.

Afterwards the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, Mr Irving, even admitted that before the firing, there was no sign in the crowd of hostility towards the British. Of his own accord, he conceded that the firing on the crowd had been a mistake:

In fact the resolution to attack the Europeans was a sudden and unpredictable impulse, which arose after the crowd had been fired on (and this, in itself, was a remote contingency, as there was no reason to believe that there would be a demonstration which could not be kept back with the horses of the mounted troops).

Now army contingents started arriving one after the other in Amritsar.

In the evening of 10 April, the Lieutenant-Governor received the news about the incidents in Amritsar. He immediately sent Commissioner Kitchin there.

## 11 April 1919

On 11 April, martial law was imposed in Amritsar. In accordance with this, not more than four people could accompany a bier or a dead body. (Later, this number was increased to eight.) A total ban was placed on processions and meetings. Wherever more than four people were found standing together, they could be fired upon. At 15-minute intervals, the biers of the dead, carried by not more than eight people, could be taken for cremation rites....

The people were angry. They wanted to take their dead for the funeral rites along with all their kith and kin. But the Government had other things in mind. Their approach was that since Britishers had been killed, the lives of Indians would also not be spared. Wherever the law was broken, the might of the army would be used, even to the extent of bombing Amritsar.

Among the well-known Englishmen in Amritsar was Mr Wathen, a college principal, who requested that the task be carried out with discretion and moderation. But the Deputy Commissioner shouted: "No more talking. We have seen the charred bodies of our dead, and our mood isn't the same as before."

Later, this attitude somewhat softened. But, even so, it was ordered that by 2 o'clock in the afternoon, all cremation rites should be completed. At 2 o'clock there would be a bugle call. If the crowd did not disperse, firing would be resorted to within 15 minutes.



In the evening of 11 April, Brigadier General R.E.H. Dyer, the Commander of the Jullunder Brigade, reached Amritsar.

### 12 April 1919

On the following day, 12 April, General Dyer marched through the town accompanied by 125 British and 310 Indian soldiers. On the way, at one point, a crowd had collected which looked as if it would be rather difficult to disperse. However, people soon got out of the way.

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, a meeting was held at the Hindu Sabha High School. At this meeting it was decided that the next day there would be a public meeting at Jallianwala Bagh, at which letters that had been written by Dr Satyapal and Dr Kitchlew would be read out. At the meeting it was pointed out that the people must be prepared to make even greater sacrifices. The next day there would also be a strike which would continue until their leaders, Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal, were released.



General Dyer

### THE MASSACRE



13 April was the day of the Baisakhi festival. It was on this day in 1699 that Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa sect.

In Amritsar, this festival was usually celebrated with great enthusiasm. But on that particular Baisakhi day, the atmosphere was quite different.

On the four previous days there had been a strike. Every day the dead bodies of people who had been the targets of the firing on 10 April were being brought out on biers.

The British authorities knew that on Baisakhi, people in their thousands would go to the Golden Temple and, because Jallianwala Bagh was close by, they would also go straight there from the temple.

In the morning of 13 April, General Dyer again



showed his strength by marching his troops through the town. At various points, drums were beaten and when people collected around this announcement was made:

No person residing in the city is permitted to leave the city without a pass. No person residing in Amritsar city is permitted to leave his house after eight. Any persons found in the streets after eight are liable to be shot. No procession is permitted in the city. Any gathering of four men would be looked upon and treated as an unlawful assembly and dispersed by force of arms, if necessary.

Immediately after General Dyer's march, several young men came out onto the streets and, beating empty tin cans in place of drums, went from one place to another announcing that at 4.30 p.m. there would be a public meeting at Jallianwala Bagh. It was 12.40. Dyer was still in town when he received the news that his proclamation had not had any particular effect and that at 4.30 p.m. there would be a public meeting at Jallianwala Bagh, notice of which was being given all through the city.

At various points in the city, police and army posts were set up. Even after this, General Dyer still had 400 soldiers with him.

Right from 2 o'clock, people started gathering in Jallianwala Bagh. At 4 o'clock, Dyer was informed that people had turned out there in great strength.

General Dyer immediately made preparations and, accompanied by his army contingent, set off for

Jallianwala Bagh, his car leading the way. His favourite officer, Captain Briggs, was with him. Behind them were two armoured cars, and a police car carrying Police Superintendent Rehill and Plomer.

Along the route, at five different places, army posts had been set up with 40 soldiers each. The contingent which went straight into the garden with General Dyer consisted of 50 Indian soldiers armed with rifles and 40 Gorkhas who only had their Kukris.

As has already been mentioned, Jallianwala Bagh was a large, uneven piece of ground around which houses had been built on all sides. Only on the southern side was there an opening. But a wall about five feet high had been put up there. Four or five narrow lanes opened onto the ground. Where one of the lanes led in from the market, the ground was at a slightly higher level. Inside the Bagh there was a sepulchre and an open well.

Dyer, with his contingent, entered the Bagh through the lane leading in from the market which was so narrow that the armoured cars could not enter it. Dyer, leaving these vehicles outside, entered the garden.

By that time there was a sizeable crowd in the Bagh. Around 20,000 people were present. And a man on the dais was giving a speech. The proceedings of the meeting were being conducted in a perfectly peaceful fashion. On entering the garden, Dyer along with his army contingent posted himself on the intervening high piece



of ground. Once there, he did not wait even for a second. He positioned 25 armed soldiers on his right and 25 on his left and, without giving the crowd any warning, gave the order to fire.

The people sitting in the gathering were terror-stricken. There was no way for them to get out of the garden. The entire crowd got up and started running to escape the bullets raining down on them. As they ran hither and thither, it turned into a stampede. There were also men in the crowd who had seen action in the war. They kept shouting to the people that instead of running, they should lie flat on the ground. But who would listen to them in such a state of terror? In whichever direction the people ran, they found their way blocked. There were the walls of houses all around. There were hundreds of people running towards each of the narrow



lanes leading out of the garden. When Dyer saw this, he ordered his soldiers to fire in the direction where people were trying to rush out. Some of them fell to the bullets, others were trampled under the feet of the stampeding crowds. Others, trying to climb over the five-foot wall, were hit by bullets and fell to the ground. There were some who ran towards the well and jumped into it.

At the very beginning, some of the soldiers fired into the air, at which General Dyer shouted: "Fire low! What have you been brought here for?"

The whole ground was like a burning cauldron. A man called Arthur Swinson gave the following eyewitness account of the episode:

Towards the exits on either flank, the crowd converged in their frantic effort to get away, jostling, clambering, elbowing and trampling over each other.... Seeing this movement, Briggs drew Dyer's attention to it, and Dyer, imagining that these sections of the crowd were getting ready to rush him, directed the fire of the troops straight at them. The result was a horror: men screamed and went down, to be trampled by those coming after. Some were hit again and again. In places the dead and wounded lay in heaps; men would go down wounded, to find themselves immediately buried beneath a dozen others.

The firing still went on. Hundreds, abandoning all hope of getting away through the exits, tried the walls which in places were five feet high and at others seven



or ten. Fighting for a position, they ran at them, clutching at the smooth surfaces, trying frantically to get a hold. Some people almost reached the top, to be pulled down by those behind them. Some, more agile than the rest, succeeded in getting away; but many more were shot as they clambered up, and some as they sat poised on the top, before leaping down on the further side.

Twenty thousand people were caught beneath the hail of bullets: all of them frantically trying to escape from the quiet meeting place which had suddenly become a screaming hell.

The firing went on for 10 to 15 minutes—that is, till the cartridges ran out. Each man armed with a rifle shot 33 bullets apiece. Dyer later admitted that if more ammunition had been available he would have used it on the crowd.

At 5.30, General Dyer and his army contingent left Jallianwala Bagh, leaving behind them a raging inferno. About 2,000 dead and wounded were lying there; many were crying out for water. But leave alone water, no assistance of any kind was available. All over the place the wounded were dying but the doctors were too terror-stricken to come inside the Bagh. People whose friends and relations had come to the meeting were also afraid of coming in. A few of the wounded crawled as far as the lanes, but then could go no further, and died there, drenched in their own blood.

After some time, the citizens of Amritsar, with fear and trepidation, came in search of their friends and relatives. But soon it became dark. How were they to look for their dear ones in the darkness? How were they to recognize them when there were piles of corpses everywhere? Besides, no one was allowed to be out after 8 o'clock.

There were some people who found their relatives and took them away, but most came out of the garden by 8 o'clock, leaving the wounded lying groaning with pain on the open ground. It is said that about a thousand wounded people lay all night in Jallianwala Bagh. Some had lost so much blood that they could not survive till the morning.

But General Dyer was still not satisfied. The same day, at 10 p.m. he led an army contingent through the streets of Amritsar to see if anyone was about after 8 p.m. "Are my orders being obeyed or not?" As he himself put it: "The city was absolutely quiet and not a soul was to be seen".

In the aftermath of this terrible incident, when facts and figures began to be collected, General Dyer made his statement to the General Staff Division on 25 August 1919:

I fired and continued to fire till the crowd dispersed, and I considered that this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral and widespread



### **British Newspaper on Jallianwala Bagh Massacre**

The following excerpts are from the comments made by the British newspaper *Daily Herald* on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, which were reproduced in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 12 January 1920:

The first detailed account of the April shootings at Amritsar, in the Punjab, shows it to have been one of the most bloody massacres of modern history.

Of the various stories of imperial oppression and the revolt against it by the subject races of the British Empire which we print today, the most amazing and stupefying in its naked horror is that of the massacre of Amritsar.... According to the report of General Dyer's evidence, over 400 Indians were killed and 1,500 wounded by the deliberate firing on a crowd of 5,000 who were listening to a speech.

No blacker or fouler story has ever been told. General Dyer is reported as admitting that the crowd might have gone away peacefully and without bloodshed, and that his motive for the slaughter was merely that the crowd would in that case have come back again and laughed, and he would have made a fool of himself!

According to his reported evidence, he admits that, with incredible indifference to human suffering, the British authorities left the wounded unattended in the streets. This, we presume, was done in order to teach men and women, of a different civilization and a different religion, what a beautiful and merciful thing Christianity is, and how sacred we British hold the law of Him who said that we were to love our enemies.

effect it was my duty to produce if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the casualties would have been greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present, but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.

There was sharp condemnation in both Britain and India of the incidents in the Punjab, and demands for an investigation resulted in the Hunter Commission being set up in October 1919. Before it, General Dyer answered several questions as follows:

Q: When you got into the Bagh, what did you do?

A: I opened fire.

Q: At once?

A: Immediately. I had thought about the matter, and I don't imagine it took me more than 30 seconds to make up my mind as to what my duty was.

Q: Did the crowd... start to disperse as soon as you fired?

A: Immediately.

Q: Did you continue firing?

A: Yes.

Q: The crowd was making an effort to go away by some of the entrances at the further end of the Bagh?

A: Yes.



- Q: I take it that towards these exits the crowd was rather more thick than at other places?
- A: Yes.
- Q: From time to time you changed your firing and directed it to places where the crowds were thickest?
- A: That is so.
- Q: Is that so?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And for the reasons you have explained to us you had made up your mind to open fire at the crowd?
- A: Quite right.
- Q: When you heard of the contemplated meeting at 12.40 you made up your mind that if the meeting was going to be held you would go and fire?
- A: ...I had made up my mind that I would fire immediately in order to save the military situation. The time had come now when we should delay no longer. If I had delayed any longer, I was liable for court-martial.
- Q: Supposing the passage was sufficient to allow the armoured cars to go in; would you have opened fire with machine-guns?
- A: I think, probably, yes.
- Q: In that case the casualties would have been very much higher?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And you did not open fire with the machine-guns

simply by the accident of the armoured cars not being able to get in?

- A: I have answered you. I have said if they had been there the probability is that I would have opened fire with them.
- Q: With the machine-guns straight?
- A: With the machine-guns.
- Q: I take it that your idea in taking the action [shooting in the Bagh] was to strike terror?
- A: Call it what you like. I was going to punish them. My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression.
- Q: To strike terror not only in the city of Amritsar but throughout the Punjab?
- A: Yes, throughout the Punjab. I wanted to reduce their morale, the morale of the rebels.

#### **Udham Singh's Statement**

On 13 March 1940, Udham Singh, known to his friends as Ram Muhammad Singh Azad, shot Michael O'Dwyer, the Lt. Governor of Punjab at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, dead at Caxton Hall in London. Udham Singh was sentenced to death and executed on 12 June 1940. The following extract is from his statement:

He deserved it. He was the real culprit, he wanted to crush the spirit of my people...What greater honour could be bestowed on me than death for the sake of my motherland?



## Martial Law

The sufferings of the people of Amritsar continued even after the massacre. Full revenge had not yet been taken for the deaths of the four Europeans and for the attack on an Englishwoman. The next day, 14 April, martial law was imposed.

Life became difficult for the townspeople. No Indian could go along the street where Miss Sherwood had been attacked unless he crawled along on his stomach. Orders were given to punish any infringement of this rule with rifle butts.

Indians were to salute any Britishers who came their way. Not doing so could mean that they would be in danger of being arrested. Even otherwise, all kinds of arrests had started in the city. Even the innocent were arrested and, under duress, were forced



## Congress Sub-Committee's Report on Martial Law Tortures

The Punjab Sub-committee of the Indian National Congress had appointed a Commission to go into the Punjab disturbances. The Commission comprised Madan Mohan Malaviya, Motilal Nehru, Gandhiji, C.R. Das, Abbas S. Tayabji, M.R. Jayakar and K. Santanam. The following excerpts on the crawling order, flogging and *salaming* are taken from a section of the report submitted by the Commission in March 1920:

**Mr Labh Chand** : "Ishwar Das, Panna Lal, Mela Ram and I wanted to go home, but were refused permission by the police. We asked permission again, but it was given on condition that we would pass the street by crawling. So all of us had to pass out the street by crawling on our bellies. We could not go to our houses by any other road"....

**Lala Megha Mal** : "That day I came home at 9 p.m. and found my wife laid up with fever. There was no water in the house to be given to her and no doctor and no medicine. I had to fetch water myself late in the night. For the seven days following my wife had to be without any treatment, as no doctor would like to creep on his belly" ....

### *A Blind Made to Crawl and Kicked*

Kahar Chand has been blind for the last 20 years. He was made to crawl and was kicked.... it is difficult to know why flogging was administered at all .... [Six] boys were flogged .... Each of them was fastened to the *tiktiki* (triangle) and given 30 stripes. One of them, Sundar Singh "became senseless after the 4th stripe but after some water was poured into his mouth by a soldier, he regained consciousness. Flogging was then resumed.... The other boys were similarly treated and the majority of them became unconscious ....[They] were dragged by the police ... then taken to the fort" ....



to make confessions. The right of those under arrest to make an appeal was taken away from them. There were public floggings even for very small misdemeanours.

The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh was, of course, callous and criminal, but even more shameful was the British Government's inhuman treatment of the people of Amritsar. Gandhiji wrote in his autobiography:

Before this outrage the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy paled into insignificance in my eyes, though it was this massacre principally that attracted the attention of the people of India and of the world.

The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh gave our freedom struggle a new direction. For one, the true mentality of the British rulers, despite their claims to a high sense of duty, was now exposed. For another, people coming together in this way and sacrificing their lives in order to demonstrate their desire for freedom, despite the curfews and other restrictions in the city, became a source of inspiration for the future struggle. Almost three decades later, when India gained its freedom, one of the greatest contributing factors was the lives sacrificed on that evening of 13 April 1919 at Jallianwala Bagh.